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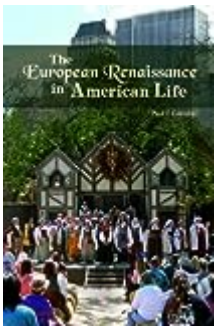

Paul F. Grendler. *The European Renaissance in American Life.* Westport: Praeger, 2006. xvi + 341 pp. $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-275-98486-1.

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Despite the dozens of decades that separate us from the Renaissance, and the disdain with which some quarters of the academy regard the period, the concept of "Renaissance" continues to have broad appeal among the American general public. How is it that literary theorists, social historians, and other scholars have rejected the term "Renaissance" in favor of "early modern," even as management gurus, novelists, urban planners, and filmmakers have endorsed the traditional concept of Renaissance? Paul Grendler's book examines how and why the famous figures and icons of Renaissance Italy and Renaissance England resonate so well outside the scholarly community. He works hard to point out ways in which these modern interpreters beyond the ivory tower have used, or misused, the principal ideas and achievements of this era.

It should be noted at the outset that while Grendler is a distinguished historian and editor with several prize-winning books and vast experience within the academy, this is not a scholarly book. From the generous font and format on each page to the lack of bibliography and simplified notes, it is deliberately targeted to a general audience. The book should be useful to lower-level undergraduates and to adult students, and it will be amusing and thought-provoking to faculty and graduate students. As in his previous work on universities, schooling, Inquisition, or Italian humanism, Grendler writes with clear, declarative prose and a transparent structure which unfolds neatly before the reader. This work contains a number of editorial asides and parenthetical comments, as well as repetition of major ideas and occasional staccato sentences inserted for emphasis (e.g., "Poppycock"; "Quite the opposite"; "This is wrong"). Such elements can be annoying to scholars accustomed to close reading but they appear frequently in more informal works.

The book opens with a brief overview of what Grendler calls the "real" Renaissance, namely the period from 1400-1620, which was characterized by innovation and achievement in art, politics, education, and other aspects of high culture. This view is very much a traditionalist one, and Grendler stands firm in his belief against the recent claims of elitism, oppression, and fanaticism attributed to the Renaissance. The conclusion of the book briefly reviews how some members of the academy (chiefly theorists) have in recent decades focused on the "dark side" of the Renaissance. Grendler admits that some of this work–on women, Jews, and other marginalized people, for example–has extended our understanding of the period. Nevertheless, the purpose of the book is not to engage in scholarly debate with colleagues but to present an overview of how the term "Renaissance" is utilized today.

The heart of the book is divided into three parts. Part 1 examines how modern Americans seek to relive the Renaissance by participating in themed Renaissance Faires, by attending "Living Last Suppers" on Maundy Thursday, and by striving to become a Renaissance Man or Renaissance Woman. The Renaissance Faires held around the country attract millions of Americans each year, many of whom arrive in costume (or "garb," as they say) and speak a simplified Elizabethan patois. Some devoted vendors or actors are even year-round "rennies" who travel from one fair to the next. Part 2 considers two largely unrelated topics in some detail. The urban renewal projects in Pittsburg and Detroit after World War II were self-styled "rebirths" in which city fathers used public-private partnerships to consciously reinvent downtown areas. Grendler argues that corporate leaders and mayors sought to imitate the great cities of Florence or Rome as they conceptualized new futures. The following two chapters analyze the myriad ways in which the philosophy and *bon mots* of NiccolÃ² Machiavelli have been adapted by business school professors, entrepreneurs, political consultants, and even social scientists. Grendler's observations are not by any means original, but his contribution is to synthesize previous scholarship in such a way that we can see how the theme of "Renaissance" and those who represent it, such as Machiavelli, have been co-opted by modern America.

The final part of the book examines the depiction of the Renaissance in fiction and film. Grendler observes that there are three kinds of Renaissance fiction: the biographical novel (e.g., Irving Stone's *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, 1987), the historical novel (e.g., Jacqueline Park's*The Secret Book of Grazia de Rossi* 1998), and the mystery/detective story (e.g., Dan Brown's*The DaVinci Code*, 2003). Each draws upon those traditional elements that make the Renaissance so attractive to the general public: strong individuals, beautiful art, intellectual breakthroughs, and a familiar backdrop. The chapter on films about the Renaissance follows a similar format, with brief plot summaries of relevant films followed by some consideration of ways in which the Renaissance is, or is not, accurately depicted. Grendler deserves credit in both chapters for including books and film from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as well as contemporary blockbusters. He notes that the depiction of the Renaissance in both media has changed somewhat, with a tendency to include more violence, more condemnation of religious fanaticism (and especially of Catholicism), and a stronger story line about one individual battling to overcome obstacles. Such tendencies are, of course, readily seen in contemporary memoirs, novels, and movies about topics other than the Renaissance too, so perhaps this is just a sign of our times.

Grendler's answer to the question of why the European Renaissance has garnered such favor with the American public lies in one word: individualism. Echoing Jacob Burckhardt, he argues that Americans admire men (and women) who can pull themselves up by their bootstraps, and who can do so without the help of groups or family. Even though we know that guilds, confraternities, and kinship networks were crucial to success in the Renaissance, American popular imagination holds that Michelangelo, Machiavelli, and the Medici triumphed over great odds because of their individual abilities. Grendler focuses exclusively on how the term "Renaissance" has been interpreted in the United States. One wonders whether this obsession with the Renaissance would be found in other Anglophone areas, such as Australia, that also seem to celebrate individualism.